



Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 4/10/2002

GAIN Report #HK2017

Hong Kong

Market Development Reports

Flu Vaccine Trial for Hong Kong Chickens

2002

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Report Highlights:

About 400,000 chickens in a farming district called Pak Sha will be vaccinated against bird flu virus starting this week on a trial scheme to test the effectiveness of vaccination as a supplementary monitoring measure against another outbreak of bird flu. If the trial results prove satisfactory, all chickens in Hong Kong may be vaccinated as a standing practice required by the government.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Hong Kong [HK1], HK

About 400,000 chickens in a farming district called Pak Sha will be vaccinated against bird flu virus starting this week on a trial scheme to test the effectiveness of vaccination as a supplementary monitoring measure against another outbreak of bird flu. The vaccination was triggered by the death of 187 chickens at two farms in Pak Sha in the past two days. As a precaution; Agriculture, Fisheries, & Conservation Department (AFCD) of the Hong Kong government (AFCD) ordered the culling of 30,000 chickens at the two farms and decided to vaccinate all 400,000 chickens in 21 farms in the Pak Sha district. If the trial results prove satisfactory, all chickens in Hong Kong may be vaccinated as a standing practice required by the government.

Subsequent to the latest outbreak of bird flu in early February 2002 (Gain report 2004 & 2007), the AFCD has been sourcing flu vaccine for chickens. It is the first time the vaccine, which is called H5 Kill Vaccine, has been used in Hong Kong. The vaccine has been ordered from Mexico and used in Mexico, Italy, and Pakistan in controlling the spread of H5N2. The trial will comprise two injections, which will be administered by farm operators under the supervision of department officers. The trial scheme will cost about HK\$480,000 (US\$61,935), with each injection costing about 20 HK cents. The government will bear all costs.

An AFCD representative said that inoculated chickens will be safe for consumption and that the taste of the birds will not be affected. The vaccination program is an additional measure and its effectiveness would be monitored for a year. The vaccine is expected to strengthen the immunity of the chickens, prevent infection, reduce outbreaks and its spread. If it is successful in preventing and controlling bird flu, it may be extended to all chickens in Hong Kong.

However, he stressed that improvement of farm hygiene and implementation of bio-security measures are of utmost importance in preventing the spread of animal disease. He revealed that the AFCD will implement the following three measures at farm level: to amend licensing conditions so as to introduce bio-security measures and raise hygiene levels on farms; to continue active monitoring of the health of chickens to ensure that only chickens that passed tests can be sold at market; and to close any farm concerned once there is an outbreak.

The industry generally welcomes the vaccination trial scheme hoping that it proves successful in controlling the spread of bird flu. On the part of the government, the cost of vaccinating 400,000 chickens is more economical than the compensation offered to farmers for the slaughtering of 400,000 chickens in the event of a bird flu outbreak. (The upper limit of compensation offered to farmers is HK\$30/chicken.) More importantly, there are many social and economic obstacles in implementing a centralized slaughtering policy for chickens at the moment. Vaccination is a possibly effective measure in reducing the risk of having another bird flu. However, its effectiveness has yet to be proved.